

This is our third and final week looking at the same passage of Scripture – the Magnificat or Mary’s Song. Only, this week, we’re adding a little bit of the back story about Mary visiting her cousin Elizabeth. The angel Gabriel had told Mary that she would have a baby and soon after Mary became pregnant, she set out on a journey to see her older cousin Elizabeth who was also pregnant in another miraculous way. Mary was very young. Elizabeth was old, or at least old to be pregnant. And when the two women meet and Elizabeth proclaims how blessed Mary is, Mary finds the words to burst forth with what I believe are some of the most profound and revolutionary words we have in the whole Bible.

She claims that all generations will count her as blessed.

She proclaims that God will save her and her people.

She proclaims that the world will be turned on its head with the poor and hungry cared for and the powerful and mighty brought down.

I love Mary because she seems to have such confidence, such hope that the child she carries will make everything right. Last week, I pointed out that Mary was so confident in God’s promised future that she sings about it in the past tense—“you *have* brought the mighty down from their thrones. You *have* lifted up the lowly. You *have* filled the hungry with good things. You *have* sent the rich away empty.”

I love the image of Mary as this bold, assured, defiant young woman proclaiming that the Emperor’s reign is coming to an end. I love the image of Mary claiming that “all generations will consider me blessed,” when as an unwed pregnant woman, the townsfolk would have called her anything but blessed. Mary has always represented for me one who demonstrates the faith and the courage that I would like to have but usually can’t seem to grasp and, yet, the idea that Mary had it somehow gives me hope that her words might just come true.

But I wonder if that image of Mary is fair to her. Surely she must have been scared. Surely she must have felt at least some doubt, some insecurity. There’s one word in this Scripture that I keep noticing—*haste*.

“In those days Mary set out and went **with haste** to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.” I’m struck by how sudden Mary’s trip to visit Elizabeth seems. It wasn’t a trip that was planned out in advance, like we normally would plan our visits with extended family members. This is not the fearless teenager independently travelling because she’s so certain of who she is. This almost seems like a scared kid running away.

This is the queer teenager running away because their parents are about to force them into conversion therapy.

This is the scared kid running away from his abusive father because the only thing scarier than leaving is staying.

This is the pregnant teenager who is disowned by her family.

Considering her time and place, considering what the angel had just told her, it would not be humanly possible for Mary to be anything other than terrified.

Imagine you are Mary for a moment. You've gone from being just another young woman ready to marry a good man to suddenly having the responsibility of birthing the hope of all people into the world. You've gone from having friends to hang out with and family to love you to likely being ostracized by all. You're fiancé is in the process of divorcing you—at least until he has his own angelic visitation—and, as in all small towns, the gossip has started flowing. You see the people suddenly hush talking as you walk by and you know they were talking about you. Maybe your own parents have disowned you.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months. Think about that for a minute. She was engaged to Joseph but she chose to spend three months of her pregnancy completely away from him. As a young woman experiencing her first pregnancy, no doubt she needed her parents (and especially her mom), but she ran away from them, stayed away from them for three months. She left with haste and she didn't come back for a long time.

Now I admit that this is speculation. We don't know why Mary went to Elizabeth's house. But it sure seems like she needed to get out of town and get out fast. Maybe she wound up at Elizabeth's house because she had nowhere else to go. Maybe it didn't matter where she went as long as she could get away. Or, maybe she knew that if there was anybody who would be there for her, anybody who would love her, anybody who would make her feel safe, it would be Elizabeth. But whatever she was thinking, choosing to go to Elizabeth's was a good decision. Listen to how Elizabeth greets her.

*And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be<sup>el</sup> a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."*

Imagine you are carrying everything Mary must have been carrying emotionally and mentally and physically and you finally arrive at Elizabeth's house after everything that has happened and the very first words Elizabeth says to you is, "blessed are you."

Blessed are you.

Elizabeth goes on. "How am I so fortunate that you would come to see me?"

Three times, Elizabeth names Mary and her child blessed. Over and over again, Elizabeth gushes about what a privilege it is that Mary would come and stay with her. Maybe for the first time since Mary became pregnant, someone spoke not only words of kindness to her but named that she was someone who was worthy of honor, of respect. Elizabeth affirmed Mary's worth. Elizabeth named blessed what everyone else named as sin. Elizabeth accepted and loved her just as she was.

Language is powerful. The words that we use can offer incredible hope, comfort, and healing. Or the words we use can do great harm. Names and labels – both good or bad – have a way of seeping into our identity and sooner or later we begin to believe what others say about us.

Virtually every psychological study of children maintains that when helping children distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate behavior, to never ever make the jump from calling something bad behavior to calling a kid a bad kid. At a very early age, kids internalize whether they are “good” or “bad” and start to live into those realities. In a very real way, the names and labels we are called often begin to define us.

Naming and re-naming are pretty big themes in Scripture. Abram and Sarai – those who are without children, are renamed Abraham and Sarah – the father and mother of many. Jacob the trickster is renamed Israel, the namesake for the Hebrew nation. Saul, the murderer is renamed Paul the great apostle. But in these cases, God gives them a new name.

Mary, this young, teenage, peasant girl has the audacity to re-name herself as blessed. But Mary needed a little help to be able to name herself blessed. Before Mary named herself blessed, Elizabeth did it for her.

Elizabeth also knew something about being labelled. She was old and childless. In fact, early in the first chapter of Luke, the angel who appeared to Mary said that “Elizabeth, the one who was said to be barren, will have a child.” In her culture, she would have been blamed for not having children. It would have been thought (and said) that there was something wrong with her, that she messed up in some kind of way, that it was her fault. In fact, Elizabeth said herself that she had been disgraced.

And maybe, precisely because Elizabeth knew the pain of being labelled, Mary maybe thought that she might understand what she was going through. And Mary was right. The older woman who knew the pain of being labelled named the younger woman as blessed, as beloved, as worthy.

And I wonder if that one act of kindness, that one act of seeing Mary for who she really is what set Mary free from all of the labels and names she had been called over the last few weeks. I wonder if that one act gave Mary the courage and the strength to find the words of her song.

Words are so powerful. As we've said, words have the power to hurt, to even kill. But words also have the power to bring life, to bring healing. The writer, Wendy Mass says, "Be kind. For everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about." We never know what someone else may be going through and, therefore, we can never underestimate the power of our words to either bring them down or lift them up.

In the creation story in Genesis, God gives humans the power to name God's creation. For all of human ingenuity and accomplishment, this is perhaps the strongest power we have been given. By having the power to name, we have the power to name others and ourselves as blessed, as beloved, as whole. Or we have the power to name others and ourselves as broken, as sinful, as unclean.

One thing the story of Mary and Elizabeth teaches us is how to use that power in the way that God intended. In a world that loves to tear people down, may we be the people that build them up. In a world that loves to lash out in anger, may we be the ones who speak gentle words of loving kindness. In a world where the powerful lift themselves up by putting others down, may we be the people who participate in God's great reversal where the lowly are lifted up and the powerful are humbled.

So let us be like Mary and Elizabeth. No matter what someone else may say about you, may you always name yourself blessed. No matter what someone else may say about others, may you always name them blessed.

And maybe more than anything, let's never underestimate the power of kindness and kind words. Be kind to yourself. Be kind to others. And in doing so, may we follow Elizabeth's example. After all, it was kind words that empowered Mary to sing her revolutionary song.